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ABSTRACT

Participation in an internship program offers many benefits to an undergraduate communication student. First, it allows a student to both make and develop professional contacts. Second, both full and part-time employment offers become available. Third, students can develop greater understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. Fourth, students can refine their career goals. Internship programs also hold benefits for the field supervisors and sponsoring organizations, such as providing motivated workers at no or relatively low cost to an organization and furnishing the opportunity to train possible future employees for the organization. Participation in internship programs allows the field supervisor and organization to maintain a working relationship with the university in which the students are enrolled. In several cases, special projects can be accomplished more inexpensively by using student expertise. Departments and universities benefit by providing a different mode of career education to their students and attracting attention to and the enrollment of majors in the department. Administration of the internship also keeps faculty in touch with the needs of the working world. At one large Southern university, student eligibility for internships is determined by the major and minor of the student, grade point average, and participation in the pre-major requirements. Interested students follow specific procedures to enter the program and to meet the internship requirements. Students are enrolled on a pass/fail basis. The grade is determined by the use of a journal kept by the student, a final paper analyzing communication in the organization, and a written evaluation by the field supervisor. (MG)

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The Importance of Internship Experiences to Undergraduate Communication Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine undergraduate internship programs. Specifically, their structure and benefits will be discussed. Benefits are presented in terms of their contributions to education (in particular skill development and career preparation).

Further, the structure of a successful internship program at a large Southern university is detailed, and rationales are given for its approach. The discussion includes a focus on faculty participation and commitment, the evaluation process, entry requirements and procedures, contact with field supervisors, meetings with participating students, and the development of new internship sites.

The Importance of Internship Experiences
to Undergraduate Communication Students

In the past decade, increasingly more and more undergraduate students have declared majors in communication. This influx of students, as well as, a continuing desire to improve education has lead to numerous considerations for strengthening academic programs. In order to meet the educational goals and needs of these students, many communication departments have begun internship programs for undergraduate students (Hanson, 1984; Konsky, 1977; Weitzel & Gaske, 1984; Wolvin & Jamieson, 1974). In fact, Downs, Harper, and Hunt's (1976) prediction that internship programs would expand and grow has proven true.

Internships are defined as "undergraduate structured practical professional experience(s) under the supervision of qualified academic and agency personnel which (are) offered for academic credit" (Konsky, 1982, p. 39). Although there are some differences across programs (e.g., levels of faculty supervision), some commonalities do exist (e.g., purpose of programs, receipt of academic credit). The goal of this paper is to describe the structure and goals of a relatively large internship program (placing over

25 students during the three academic terms) administered at a large Southern university. The program described is regarded by departmental faculty, college administrators, experiential education staff members, and field supervisors as widely successful. Further, students who have participated in this program have overwhelmingly reported great contributions to their education from internship experiences. While we have surveyed field supervisors and are planning a quantitative examination of student views, such findings will not be presented in this paper as they are not within the scope of the paper.

The program has been in existence for eight years. One of the authors acted as the Faculty Director for five years, and the other as the graduate Assistant Director for four years. During this period, the program experienced considerable growth, and in fact at present, has many more organizations requesting interns than interns available each semester.

The remainder of the paper details the particular structure of this internship program and frequently gives the rationale behind this structuring. Specifically, we address the benefits of internships to all involved, entrance requirements for the program, supervision and evaluation of students, development of new internship placements, and handling difficult situations.

Benefits from Internships

Benefits to Students

Participation in an internship presents many benefits to an undergraduate student. First, an internship allows a student to both make and develop professional contacts. During their internship, most students are exposed to a variety of people in their own or similar professions. Thus, it is possible for an industrious student to make numerous contacts. Beyond this, based on the close working relationship with the field supervisor, students develop a professional working relationship with at least one member of the organization, and generally with more than that individual. Certainly, these contacts are invaluable in increasing one's transition into the workforce (i.e., helping an upper-level student to feel a part of the professional network in his/her area) and in searching for positions after graduation (as well as possible part-time positions).

A second and related benefit is both full and part-time employment offers. We have had a number of students hired based on skills acquired and contributions made during their internships with organizations. Further, interns increase their marketability simply by gaining professional experience, developing new skills, and improving existing skills. Thus, even if they are not hired by the organization with which they interned, it is highly likely that they will be more attractive to other organizations.

Beyond specific offers is information an intern acquires on the job market and the qualifications and demands for certain positions. Such information is highly important when students begin the job search process.

Often, the knowledge and experience an intern gains could not be attained in the traditional classroom environment (Downs et al., 1976). Internships allow students unique opportunities to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to "real world" situations and to participate in the daily activities of an organization. For most students, diverse types of knowledge are accumulated.

Third, students can benefit by developing greater understandings of their own own strengths and weaknesses (Downs et al., 1976). Although students may receive a good deal of feedback from professors, sometimes feedback from job supervisors is more instrumental in helping them determine what they do particularly well and what will will need to improve for career success. Also, frequently comments and suggestions from someone in a position like the one they aspire to hold are taken more seriously than comments and suggestions from faculty members (who some students perceive as existing in the ivory tower and not knowing too much about the specifics of the working world). For example, we, as well as, other faculty in our department stress the great importance of writing skills for communication students. However, it is generally after internship experiences that students begin to seek out

additional writing courses to take. And even students who do not enroll in supplementary writing courses will often comment that they wish they had the opportunity to do so.

Fourth, students can benefit from internship experiences by refining their career goals. For some students, an internship in public relations or sales convinces them even further that such a career is perfect for them. Other students discover that public relations, sales, or whatever is not at all like they conceived it to be. This realization leads some to rethink what they want to do after graduation (and it certainly is better to make the discovery while still a student than after graduation). This thinking process, whether it strengthens or lessens the commitment to follow a certain course of action, is extremely valuable.

Thus, participation in an internship program presents students with several real and potential benefits. These benefits likely have contributed to the general growth of internship programs across the country, as well as, the positive reviews received by the vast majority of student participants (Jamieson & Wolvin, 1976; Konsky, 1982).

Benefits to Field Supervisors
and Sponsoring Organizations

In addition to benefits for students, internship programs also hold benefits for the field supervisors and sponsoring organizations. As Hanson (1984) has argued, employers stand to greatly benefit from "a close involvement

with a young person who is often eager to please, and willing to do almost anything for a line of 'experience' on his or her resume" (p. 54).

First, internships can provide motivated workers at no, or relatively low, cost (other than time) to an organization. Because our students are carefully screened, they are individuals desiring to make contributions, while simultaneously learning and improving their own skills. For some organizations, such as non-profit ones needing particular projects done, student contributions have become almost essential.

Second, a potential benefit to supervisors and organizations is that internship experiences may provide the opportunity to "train" possible future employees for the organization. Thus, internships can function as a sort of apprentice period after which an intern is prepared to more into a "regular" position in the organization.

Third, participation in internship programs allows the field supervisor and organization to maintain a working relationship with the university, as well as, contacts with individuals within the university system. In a similar vein, the supervisor and the organization have an opportunity to contribute to the educational system.

Fourth, in several cases, special projects, or what would be costly expenditures if hiring outside personnel, can be accomplished much more inexpensively by using student

expertise. And such work can be accomplished while contributing to a specific student and the university.

Benefits to the Department and the University

Departments and universities which support internship programs also stand to benefit from them. These benefits occur across several dimensions.

First, through internship programs, departments and universities benefit by providing a different mode of career education. Often, there is not time in regular classes (or the advising process) to spend on the specifics of particular careers. Also, such programs allow students to gain practical experience and apply theories -- this experience cannot often be gained in traditional academic settings.

Second, internship programs can attract attention and majors to one's department. Students learn through both formal communication (e.g., course announcements, posted notices) and informal communication (e.g., conversations with other students) about internship possibilities. Further, solid programs function as public relations tools (Downs et al., 1976) in that field supervisors learn about the skills of your students, the contributions of communication people, and the importance of communication.

Third, administration of an internship program keeps faculty abreast of the needs of the working world. Possessing such understanding can be important in determining curriculum changes.

The Program Structure

Student Eligibility and Program Entrance Procedures

Student eligibility. Konsky's (1982) research indicates that 51.4 percent of the internship programs surveyed restricted participation to majors only, while 30.8 percent admitted all qualified students regardless of their majors. Due to the time involved in administering the program, as well as, the general focus of our program (i.e., communication-related positions), admittance was available only to communication majors or minors.

In addition, internship credit is generally reserved for junior and senior level students. This criteria is important because it ensures that students participating will have taken the pre-major requirements and have had the opportunity for skill-building. It is also required that students have completed three of the following four courses: public speaking, introduction to communication (both of which are pre-major requirements), interpersonal communication, and organizational communication. While occasional exceptions may be made to this policy (such as taking one of these courses concurrently with the internship), it is a general guideline to ensure that students have the appropriate academic background.

Another requirement for entrance into the program is at least a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) on a 4.0 scale. We believe that the reputation and growth of the program can

only continue if our "best" students represent the department. For the program to be a continued success, the commitment, trust, and confidence of field supervisors must be maintained. We believe that the best way to achieve these goals is by supplying them with talented, motivated students. In large part, it is also such motivated students who tend to seek out internship experiences. Again, this requirement is a guide, rather than an absolute rule. Students who desire to participate, but do not meet the GPA requirement, may meet with us in individual conferences and write a persuasive justification for why they believe they should be allowed to participate without meeting the requirement. When students demonstrate such motivation and use high quality arguments, often they are allowed to participate (especially if they are close to the GPA requirement).

It is important to again note here that these requirements are general guidelines. While they are used in our departmental literature, exceptions may occasionally be made. For example, a second-semester sophomore, who has had all the basic courses and is motivated, may be admitted to the program. An occasional student, who is majoring in a communication-related area and has taken several communication courses, may participate without necessarily declaring communication as a major or minor. And students who do not meet the GPA requirement, but present persuasive rationales, can be admitted. The guidelines are meant to

preserve the strength of the program and provide opportunities appropriate to students; however, individual differences and needs are considered as well.

Program entrance procedures. Interested students follow specific procedures for entrance into the program. First, students request internship program application forms from either of the two coordinators or the departmental office. These application forms ask students for general information (such as their name, address, year in school, related work experiences, courses taken that prepared them for the internship experience), and for the type of internship they seek and preferred semester. The application form is to be submitted to the coordinators with a current resume, and, if necessary, the written persuasive justification (i.e., if the student does not meet one of the entrance requirements).

Generally, these forms are completed approximately one and a half months prior to the semester the student desires an internship. Near the end of the fall and spring terms, students interested in future internships are invited to meet with the coordinators and students who currently have internships to talk about the program in general, as well as, the specifics of what current interns are doing. This meeting is conducted following the final semester meeting for current internship students, and such students are asked to stay and describe their experiences to new interested students.

Following discussions and recommendations by current interns, the Director and/or Assistant Director explain the specifics of the program (e.g., entrance requirements, amount of work time required, evaluation process, arrangements for meetings) and answer student questions. Then, application forms are distributed. In addition, lists of available internship sites (with descriptions of intern responsibilities at each; a paid/unpaid distinction; and any special considerations for the position, for example, if a student must be available on Mondays and Wednesdays) are disseminated, and students may ask additional questions about specific field placements. These lists are updated each semester and are categorized by "type" of internship (e.g., writing, sales, public relations, etc.) and cross-referenced.

Students then complete the application form, prepare a resume, and make decisions regarding places they would most prefer to be an intern. Students are encouraged to rank order their top three or four choices of internship sites. These forms are then returned to one of the coordinators the following week.

Students who cannot attend or miss this meeting are met with individually and informed about the program. In addition, we also have some students who do not express an interest until the beginning of the desired semester. We do work to accommodate these students, but because interviewing

has already begun by this time, not all of these students are able to have their first choices of positions.

Once the deadline for the receipt of paperwork has passed, the coordinators meet to determine which students meet the entrance requirements and make interview assignments. During this process, the coordinators look across all request forms at desired internship sites (i.e., the rank orderings of student preferences). Because most internship sites are only interested in interviewing three or four students, our goal in this process is to determine how often particular sites are requested. When several students request a particular site and all of those students cannot be interviewed there, we make decisions based on GPA, work experience, and courses taken. It is also possible that we might contact a field supervisor to see if he/she is interested in interviewing additional students or desires more than one intern that particular semester. Due to the large number of possible internship sites (over 80 in our case), only infrequently are specific sites over requested. In addition, if a particular student should not get to interview with one of his/her top three or four choices, there are still the other two or three remaining preferences on this list.

The end result of the coordinators' meeting is a "card" for each student. This card contains the names and telephone numbers of field supervisors in requested sites. After picking up these cards, students contact the persons

listed on their cards and schedule interviews. Our goal is to as much as possible simulate the "job hunt" process. Thus, students must schedule their own interviews, make decisions based on these interviews, and accept or decline offered positions.

The interviewing process usually takes place during the final two weeks of the academic term preceding the one in which the student will act as an intern. Thus, placements are generally made prior to the semester's end, and when the new semester begins, students are prepared to start work.

Another important goal in this process is to allow field supervisors to make decisions about which students best fit with their needs and organizations. Many field supervisors interview more than one student (and sometimes students from other programs as well), and thus have complete freedom in extending offers.

Once a student has accepted an internship offer, the student registers for internship credit under a particular course number and completes additional paperwork.

Student Requirements During Internship

After choosing an internship site, interviewing, and accepting a field supervisor's offer, interns determine their number of credit hours and complete preliminary paperwork. In our program, internships may be taken for variable credit, of between one and three hours. Most students register for three hours of credit as that is consistent with the remainder of their courses. However,

students who need to work less hours or do not necessarily need the credit hours may register for less. Based on our curriculum, three hours of internship credit count as a within the major, upper division course. Internship credit may be received up to six hours (with three as the maximum in a given semester), but only three of those six can count as a course requirement. The additional three hours, if taken, count as elective hours.

In order to receive three hours of academic credit, a student must work ten to twelve hours a week throughout the semester. (These totals apply to fall and spring terms. The totals are slightly higher in the summer term due to a shorter academic period.) For two hours of credit, students work between eight and ten hours each week. One hour of credit requires six to eight hours of work per week.

Prior to beginning work, the intern also completes a Learning Contract. This contract is between the student, department, and university, and it specifies what the student hopes to learn, objectives for accomplishing those goals, and the processes of meeting with faculty and being evaluated. Copies of this document are filed with the internship coordinators, as well as, with the university's experiential education office.

Students are also asked to submit a brief additional form, called the Work Information Form. This forms lists

days of the week and times when they commonly work. It is useful whenever it becomes necessary to contact a student at work.

During the course of the internship, students meet semi-monthly with one of the coordinators to discuss the specifics of their learning experience. In addition to these individual meetings, two or three group meetings are held with all interns during the semester. These are generally held in the evenings and focus on overall experiences and procedures.

Evaluation of students. Once the process of securing the internship placement, registering for credit, and completing initial documentation is completed, the student begins the internship. In addition to the hours worked each week, students engage in additional tasks which contribute to their education and allow evaluation of their internship experiences.

In our program, all students are enrolled on a pass/fail basis. Because of direct faculty supervision, frequently contact with field supervisors, and group and individual meetings with internship students, we have never had a student fail. While potentially problematic situations are few, the ones which do occur require careful thought and attention. As Hyre and Owens (1984) state, "honesty along with open-minded and timely follow-up is always the best policy" (p. 372). Determining a "pass" is not only much easier, but we argue much more appropriate in

this case, than determining a particular letter grade because of the number of variables which enter into the environmental learning experience (e.g., working with different field supervisors, the wide range of projects, student experience and preparation for project assigned, etc.).

Our recommendations for the passing or failing grade come from several sources. These are: (1) a log or journal kept by each student and submitted at the semester's end, (2) a final paper analyzing communication in the organization, and (3) a written evaluation by the field supervisor (in addition to a midterm oral evaluation).

The log or journal contains daily or semi-weekly entries and includes not only information on project involvement, but also how the intern is responding to these activities. Interns describe what they are learning and how they feel about that. They also make observations in these journals about how communication takes place in their organization. We suggest that interns keep these in spiral notebooks and that they are informal records. Certainly, they do not have to be typed or otherwise perfected.

The final paper, an analysis of communication in the organization, is submitted during finals week with the journal. We have a handout with suggested guidelines and which poses example question to cover. This handout is distributed and discussed at the final group meeting of the

term. We are also open to students suggesting more narrow topics for this paper which meet with their own individual interests.

Students who are enrolled for either two or three hours of credit are required to submit both the journal and the final paper. However, students enrolled for only one credit hour may submit only the journal.

Students are also evaluated based on recommendations from their field supervisors. Approximately three weeks before each semester's end, employers are sent evaluation forms, along with thank you letters, and they are asked to return these forms during finals week. Essentially, the evaluation forms use a category system in which the supervisor rates the student from excellent to poor on items such as creativity, industriousness, and professional promise. These specific categories are followed by open-ended questions which ask for additional comments. In addition, we do midterm evaluations, usually by telephone, of student performance thus far.

After the internship is completed, students are allowed to see these evaluation forms and are encouraged to discuss them with us. Further, some students will make copies of the evaluations to use as future references in job application and interviewing situations.

Internship Coordinator Responsibilities

During Internship Period

In addition to coordinator responsibilities discussed under the student section (e.g., conducting group and individual meetings, screening students and their paperwork, evaluating students, etc.), coordinators have other responsibilities each term.

One of these responsibilities is maintaining frequent contact with the field supervisors. Our program is based on relatively tight control. Hyre and Owens (1984) present several arguments favoring tight faculty control of internship programs. These include: (1) ensuring students receive a strong educational experience and gain practical work experience, (2) minimizing the likelihood that mistakes will occur and lessening the severity of those which do, (3) continuing to emphasize strong departmental commitment to the program to the sponsoring organizations and maintaining the confidence of field supervisors, and (4) continuing to build a strong reputation with field supervisors, students, other faculty and administrators.

Such contact occurs both through periodic telephone calls and correspondence. At the beginning of each term, we send each field supervisor a letter. This letter both thanks the individual for accepting one of our students as an intern and specifies the requirements of our program. The requirements discussed fall into three categories: student responsibilities, field supervisor responsibilities,

and departmental coordinator responsibilities. Also near the end of the term, we send another thank you letter with the evaluation form.

Development of new internship placements. In addition to administering the present program, coordinators also have the responsibility of developing and screening new internship placements. For us, these placements have mainly been developed through contacts in professional organizations, committee work, and as a part of our university duties. Not surprisingly, after hearing about the internship program and student skills and contributions, most employers are more than willing to take students as interns. In fact, as the reputation of our program has grown, we have been able to less actively recruit placements -- because employers now call us desiring our students.

We accept both paid and unpaid positions. If possible, we encourage employers to pay at least some stipend or transportation costs for the students, but this is not required. We are also quite open in explaining to employers that the paid positions tend to be our most competitive and often attract our better students.

However, when discussing positions with students, we stress that while pay is certainly nice, it should not be an overriding consideration for internship experience. Often going to a smaller, less established organization may allow

a student a wider latitude in experiences. The concern is with practical experience and skills attained and sharpened, not with pay for a few hours work each week.

We also develop positions both on and off-campus. Positions on-campus are highly attractive to those students without automobiles or with extremely tight class schedules.

In addition, each spring we coordinate and host an internship reception. Participating and perspective students, field supervisors, departmental faculty, experiential education staff, and other university representatives are invited to attend. Generally, we have been successful in having the food, drinks, and location (or at least some combination of these) donated by sponsoring organizations. This allows the organizations an opportunity to express their thanks to our students and the university.

While we each received a one course reduction in teaching load per semester, we found that the time required to administer the internship program exceeded the time involved in teaching a more traditional course. However, the contributions made to students and their appreciation of the program made these efforts worthwhile. We are convinced, based on these experiences, that internships can serve an important complements to traditional coursework and enhance a student's overall understanding of communication.

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